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Peter Bustin

figure/figurine

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Cover Image

Peter Bustin
Lekythos, 2000
earthenware and stain
14" x 4" x 3"
12.5" x 3.5" x 3"

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Nova Scotia Centre for Craft and Design
Mary E Black Gallery
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www.craft-design.gov.ns.ca

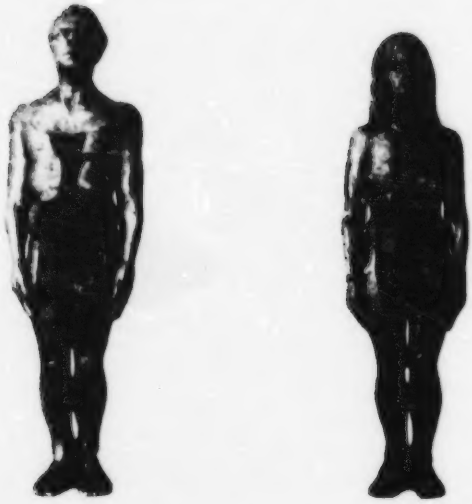
Gallery Hours
Monday - Friday 9:00am - 4:00 pm
Saturday 10:00am - 4:00pm

Foreward

The tradition of small sculptures in ceramic is a long one and its precedents edge the craft discourse into the related areas of the portrait, the nude, and the decorative arts Peter Bustin, based in Halifax, is one of the few Canadian artists who deals with these issues. His exhibition is the first solo show at the Mary E. Black Gallery, which has previously focussed on small groups thematically related, or juried shows united by the medium.

In Halifax, unlike many capitals, there is not a lot of public sculpture and almost none of it is nude. The introduction of small scale works of this sort and this calibre in such an accessible context offers the opportunity to Nova Scotians to explore a venerable topic in a vibrant new way.

Chris Tyler,
Manager, Crafts, Design, and Publishing Programmes
Culture Division



Peter Bustin
Lekythos, 2000
earthenware and stain
14" x 4" x 3"
12.5" x 3.5" x 2"

Peter Bustin: figure/figurine

Neil Forrest

> *'So you see,' said Utz, 'not only was Adam the first human person He was the first ceramic sculpture.'*
>
> Bruce Chatwin [1]

The presence of the human figure in contemporary art is testimony to an endless fascination with our own image. Figuration in ceramics occupies an important role in how we speak through our own image, one that extends to the origins of civilization. As Bruce Chatwin notes in Utz, the human figure is the key to the power of representation, coming from a long tradition which attributes the original human figure as being made of clay.

Peter Bustin occupies a unique place in the current milieu as he rejuvenates the art of the ceramic figurine in a time when there is a notable scarcity of the human figure in the three-dimensional arts. This exhibition, *Peter Bustin: figure/figurine*, confirms the specialized figurative tradition in ceramics, the figurine scale, and the significance of the medium and its method of forming. *Peter Bustin: figure/figurine*, declares the artist's subject but also makes a distinction in the art of the human figure.

What is figure and what is figurine? The difference is scale. For painting, the scale of depicted figures

Peter Bustin
Muybridge's Eve #3, 2000
earthenware
12" x 8" x 5"

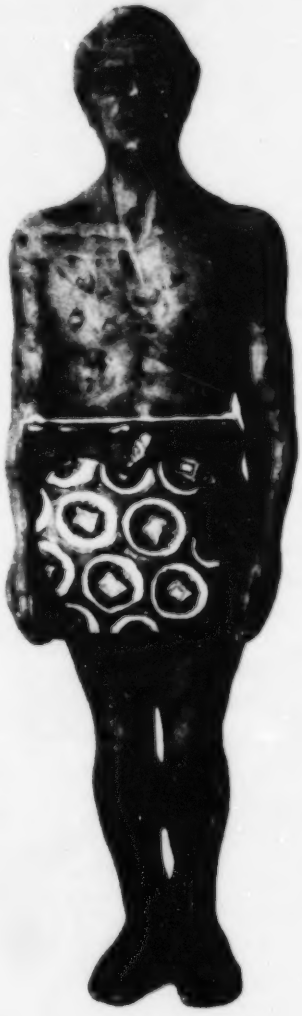
varies widely and small scale figures have no particular nomenclature. In the broadest definition of sculpture, small scale figures in bronze and stone are by definition figurines, however we seldom apply this term anymore. When we do hear the term figurine, we spontaneously imagine small ceramic figures on coffee tables. Almost by instinct, we know that figurines are generic in appearance and confirmed by mass production. The decorative ceramic figurine tradition is one that Bustin does not hide from, in fact he embraces it. But he charts distinctive territory that extends the content of the genre and draws from the larger domain of 'sculpture'.[2]

Peter Bustin's epiphany happened one afternoon as he strolled into the sculpture room at the Victoria and Albert Museum, a cavernous space dominated by plaster casts taken from Italian masterworks. Making his way slowly around this huge room, he recalls turning away from the cast of Michelangelo's David and finding in a small box affixed to a nearby wall, the fig leaf reserved for the David when the Royal Family of the past came to call. In that single moment, the enormous authority of michelangelo's sculpture crossed wires with an impression of the Queen's moral sensibility protected only by a plaster leaf! Bustin was instantly convinced that his choice of modeling the human figure was one with endless potential.

Since his fourth year at art college, Peter Bustin has been studying and making the body in clay. His acquaintanceship with the figure was made after realizing the small cup which he had perched on a disproportionately large plinth, seemed to make more sense as a bust than a vessel. He then deliberately made a number of portrait heads, his first subject being Cardinal Richelieu (the authority behind the reign of King Louis XIII). Bustin's exposure to the scope of the portrait bust from his stay in Europe, opened up a range of opportunities, and he focused initially on Italian terra cotta tradition. Bustin fused the Florentine figurative tradition with the *istoriato* ('story-painted' pottery) by directly 'story painting' onto his figures. He has pushed this further, incorporating current events and popular culture as his personal *istoriato* themes. Nearly disguised by ornamental flourishes, are references to favourite books and the digital revolution (see Bustin's Adam and Eve pair 'Digital Knowledge')

At the time of Bustin's undergraduate studies at NSCAD, the maiolica pottery and figure tradition might have been just an esoteric footnote to the dominant Japanese influence of an earthy and informal style. However, it was the combined efforts of NSCAD's Walter Ostrom, his students and a handful of American potters that tugged this medium from obscurity into the limelight. Bustin was therefore familiar with the wares from the cluster of towns known as Gubbio, Urbino, Deruta and Faenza as well as the maverick ceramic sculpture from of the Della Robbias. The Della Robbia clan were from Florence, and their production was amongst the most creative and enduring episodes in Renaissance Italy. Luca, Andrea and Giovanni, made prodigious figurative ornament for church, civic buildings and private patrons. Bustin's heroes are Andrea and Luca, for the purity in the poses and poise of their subjects

Commissions for Della Robbia workshop called for decorative and architectural framing of the figure groups, and these were supplied as plentiful fruits, pine cones, leaves and other naturalistic symbols modeled in terra cotta. This kind of bounty appears in Bustin's vision, but for him the human figures become the framing device for the embellishment, such as in his Adam and Eve pair 'Lekythos'. This inverts the convention used by the Della Robbias



Peter Bustin
Digital Knowledge, 2000
earthenware, maiolica, stains
14" x 4" x 3"

Bustin labours under distant European mentors, continually setting the standard of full and vigorous attention to the human form as an act of noble transcription. His modeling is almost an act of piety to the figure and its history in art. Michelangelo defined modeling this way: "by sculpture I mean that which is done by subtracting; that which is done by adding - namely modeling - resembles painting". In conversation, Bustin's fidelity to this timeless method of forming clay is frequently mentioned, and the association of ceramics to painting is fundamental to his practice. He often looks at the painting of Lucian Freud and enthuses about its fleshy and sculptural character. Bustin describes his art as 'painting in space', yet it is equally about subverting gravity. Ceramics is the most sensitive medium to scale. It is soft when worked and has limited capacity to support itself vertically. The structural problems of a large torso supported by the modest architecture of slender legs are problematic for the clay sculptor. This challenge determines how the sculptor in clay must configure the three dimensional human form. The inclusion of props in a figure sculpture might appear to be a compositional device, but are primarily a structural necessity. Bustin has tackled the problem of support in several ways, and this exhibition reveals the artist exercising techniques essential to figure modeling. His 'Purple Glenn' and 'Girl in Chair' use two common conventions: furniture props to distribute weight to multiple contact points, and the concentration of the mass nearer to the ground plane. The third strategy is to work in the diminutive scale of the figurine, and Bustin invests his figures with poise, movement and architecture.

Bustin naturally connects his practice to the figurine tradition of the Baroque and Rococo period and especially to Meissen ceramics. [3] The work of Johann Kaendler, a clay modeler originally trained as a sculptor, revolutionized the figurine genre by directly studying his subjects to achieve anatomical correctness, versus the practice of artistic imagination. This allegiance to working directly from observation is also Bustin's preference. The portrait bust format with which Bustin began, has been replaced by the small figurine. The next development was an increased vigor to the modeling. Perhaps his fascination with Auguste Rodin led Bustin to this conclusion. He knew that Rodin's ambition was to model individuals and therefore that Rodin had identified the fissured psychological condition of modernity.[4] With Rodin, the roughness of art making had been spotlighted. The manipulation of the plastic medium provides the signature of the maker's effort and feelings. Bustin takes up this call and smoothness gives way to the pressure of the mark. Rodin's affirmation of surface and its animation, plus the palpable physicality of the medium, encouraged Bustin to associate increasingly with the sculpture tradition. Bustin also believes the role of an artist is to synthesize and popularize, and to think with tradition. The emotional drama and inner turmoil that we find in Rodin's sculpture is not essential for Bustin, but he too, expects his subjects to express themselves with their bodies, not with their heads.

Peter Bustin
Digital Knowledge, 2000
earthenware, maiolica, stains
12.5" x 3.5" x 3"

Not all of Peter Bustin's ceramics are restful portraits and statuary. In the exhibition is a series which captures a body in five consecutive positions. It is a human locomotion study that examines one figure, a woman, as the subject is transformed by motion. Here he looks specifically at Eadweard Muybridge's famous photographic sequences of human locomotion. Bustin hasn't the scientific detachment of Muybridge, yet his figures suggest a temperate perspective of the human body, perhaps showing us an ambivalence, or maybe uncertainty, about beauty. Peter Bustin appears not to seek a grand ideal, but a popular one. Beauty is considered (or at least an aesthetics of form), but it isn't a tem-

plate to manufacture human form. In fact, his subjects bear a resemblance to the 'real' people in Muybridge's studies. His subjects look like us, the viewers.

Peter Bustin is one of many post - WWII ceramists who have sorted through art history and have ended up looking at the figurative tradition. His interest in the figure was bolstered by his Master's studies in Britain where the figure is a more favoured genre. Mo Jupp, Jill Crowley, Mick Flynn and others rekindled the genre and continue to foreground British ceramic figurative art. In Canada it's Joe Fafard. In the United States ceramists Robert Arneson and Viola Frey, and recently the work of a younger generation such as Doug Jeck and Adrian Arleo keep this genre stimulating

For a younger figurative ceramist like Bustin, radical developments in figurative ceramics meant the dormant sculpture tradition of bronze and marble could be circumvented. Anything might happen, and Bustin took up the challenge to re-discover figuration from within his own set of personal interests: the Della Robbias, Meissen figurines and Rodin. Bustin emerges like some kind of hard-liner, a conservative among radicals. His figures would be true to anatomical correctness and avoid the expressiveness and abstraction that had become de rigueur. Bustin's work does not re-envision the human figure, instead, he presents the human figure in a devoted and recognizable manner: the figure as a decorative art. His 'paired' figurines for example, are posed illustrating decorated tiles, sherds and tiny plates. These favorite decorations are applied or inserted over the figure's genitalia. These props or veils impart a sense of dignity. His recent 'Adam and Eve' series carry the signs and effects that Bustin loves so much in ceramic traditions. In a sense, they are self-portraits. The artist and his passions. The passions are fragments of decoration. If Bustin is not a potter

Peter Bustin,
Muybridge's Eve # 1, #2, 2000
earthenware
12" x 4" x 5"
12" x 9" x 5"

or tile maker, he can at least hold the bits of decoration that inspire him. One of his favorite visual quotes is from a simple portrait bust known as 'The Old Woman' by Caffaggiolo (1506-10). She is portrayed as toothless and happy. Bustin has painted a sliver of this sculpture onto his own piece. The original Italian Renaissance sculpture has a necklace which is painted, and yet all other details are modeled three dimensionally. As Bustin says of this work, "it is anti-sculpture! I love the visual play between the top of the dress (rendered three dimensionally) and what is above it (rendered two dimensionally). The simple modeled folds in the clothing, and the more intricate 'faux' shadows with folds painted on. When I saw the piece in Cambridge, there was a real shadow under the chin and then the painted shadow below the necklace".[5] Of a piece riddled with incongruity, the practical explanation may be that the modeler was not the painter, and it was the painter who decided that a necklace was in order and that it needed a shadow. Bustin gives us his Adam and Eve pair 'paio istoriato' in response.

Bustin is curiously untainted by a world soaked in irony. His passion for the human form is carefully balanced by his own regard for morality and decorum. Bustin prefers the figure as nude, since the naked figure represents a return to origins. The Jewish tradition places the origin of humanity in golem. "A recipe for making a golem calls for a quantity of untouched mountain soil. This was to be kneaded with fresh spring water and, from it, a human image formed".[6] Another is the Adam and Eve story, which says "And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, .."[7] For Bustin, his choice of terra cotta clay has symbolized the biblical idea of creation, that Man is formed of most common matter, and what Kenneth Clark deems 'Earthy' versus 'Celestial'. Bustin's motivation is the pleasure derived from the expressive potential of clay, selecting an expression that is cultural rather than personal. He works in the oldest sculptural tradition of clay modeling, which according to the Roman author Pasitieles, 'is the mother of statuary art' Bustin connects a material essence to his genre, establishing meaning by selecting earthenware and maiolica amidst a range of possibilities. Consequently, his figures speak not of transmutability, but of accessibility and the power of popular culture. He

Peter Bustin
Eve figure, 2001
earthenware, maiolica, stains
12.5" x 3.5" x 3"

resurrects the Renaissance predilection for the use of ornament to frame his subjects and decorative painting applied to the form. He has a sense of Kaendler's careful and cool figurines, the emotional gentility of the Della Robbias' subjects and Rodin's restoration of sculpture as a modern modeling practice. Pushing clay, adding, tearing and pushing again, Bustin exploits one of the most direct material experiences, but is careful to avoid an excess of expression. The figurines are earthy, with or without glaze. His portraits of cultural icons become more companionable as a terra cotta studies, and in doing so he proves terra cotta to be an enduring and powerful medium. Bustin demands that we read their decoration at the same moment as we read their human form, requiring of the viewer an empathy for the language of decoration.

Peter Bustin's ceramic figurines are an unique synthesis, applying anonymous craft traditions to the self conscious requirements of the contemporary artist. He has chosen an idiom that needs no intellectual construction. Bustin's synthetic directs us to themes both great and secondary in art and craft history, cleverly mingling them with splinters of pop culture. Usually kept at a distance from one another, he serves the two great masters of pictorial representation and decoration. Bustin's work presents us with the self-conscious pleasure of maneuvering the past into blithe encounters with the present, as the artist makes serious his contribution to the figurative and especially the figurine genre.

Neil Forrest

Peter Bustin
Muybridge's Eve #4, 2000
earthenware
12" x 4" x 6"

Footnotes

1 Bruce Chatwin, Utz pg. 42

2 I refer to 'sculpture' as the broad domain of 3 dimensional art that includes all media.

3 Meissen Manufactory, established approximately in 1705, near Dresden in Saxony. Janet Gleeson, Arcanum p.54

4 William Tucker, The Language of Modern Sculpture , chapter 1

5 in conversation with the artist, Jan '01

6 Bruce Chatwin, Utz pg. 43

7 Genesis 2, (Gen. 2:7- NKJ version)

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Ceramic Art of the Renaissance, by Timothy Wilson, published by University of Texas Press in cooperation with the British Museum, 1987

Peter Bustin: Selected biography

Academic History

1986-87	Master of Arts
	Faculty of Art and Design,
	Cardiff Institute of Higher Education, Cardiff, Wales
1981-84	Bachelor of Fine Arts
	Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada

Recent Exhibitions and Commissions

2001	Figure/Figurine (solo show)
	Mary E. Black Gallery, Halifax, Nova Scotia
2000-01	World War II Aircrewman (bronze sculpture 6' high)
	Commissioned by the Aircrew Association, Nova Scotia Branch
2000	Drawing on the Figure (group show)
	Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery, Waterloo, Ontario
1998	Current Figures (solo show)
	Anna Leonowens Gallery, Halifax Nova Scotia
1997	Collector's Collections
	Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax, Nova Scotia
1996	Peter Bustin at Nancy Poole's Studio
	Nancy Poole's Studio, Toronto , Ontario
	Walter Ostrom: The Advocacy Of Pottery
	Invitational Group Show
	Art Gallery of Nova Scotia
	Meter ^{2}
	Dartmouth Heritage Museum, Dartmouth, Nova Scotia
	Crafts in Atlantic Canada: NSCAD Alumni
	Anna Leonowens Gallery, Halifax, Nova Scotia
1995	The Summit Collection: The 1995 G-7 Summit
	Five works selected for display in leaders' suites and subsequent public exhibition, Summit Place, Halifax, Nova Scotia
1989-92	The Sailor, (bronze sculpture of a Canadian Sailor circa 1940: 8' high)
	Waterfront Park, Halifax, Nova Scotia
	Commissioned by The Atlantic Chiefs and Petty Officers Association
	Unveiled May 1992
1990	The Sailor, (36" replica of the Halifax Sailor)
	NATO Complex, Norfolk, Virginia, USA
	Commissioned by the Canadian Navy
1987	Portrait of Sir James Callaghan, (ceramic)
	County Hall, Docklands, Cardiff, Wales
	Commissioned by the South Glamorgan Institute of Higher Education